

THE DEATH OF TECUMSEH AND
THE RISE OF RUMPSEY DUMPSEY:
THE MAKING OF A VICE PRESIDENT

BY STUART S. SPRAGUE*

The Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh, promoter of Indian unity, orator, and warrior, was much admired. His speeches were reprinted in the white man's newspapers.¹ When American troops brought personally from Kentucky by Governor Isaac Shelby advanced upon the British and Indians, they clashed at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813. Tecumseh was apparently slain. But for forty years an off-again, on-again debate as to who really killed Tecumseh occurred in America's newspapers. The winner of this morbid competition also achieved the dubious honor of becoming vice president in 1837, rallying his followers with the savage chant of "Rumsey Dumpsey, Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh."

The earliest account of the chieftain's demise reported simply, "It is said that Tecumseh is killed."² Indeed John J. Crittenden had added this to his letter as a postscript. Soon thereafter, the Dayton [Ohio] *Republican* announced that:

Colonel Johnson received five wounds in the engagement but is now considered out of danger—GENERAL TECUMSEH after having been frequently and severely wounded, fell with *one hundred* of his brethren on the field of battle—thus makes his quietus, perhaps the greatest Indian General that ever lifted a tomahawk.³

Noteworthy is the fact that neither of these two early accounts attribute Tecumseh's death to any one soldier.

That happy state of affairs did not last long; some twenty-five days after the event the Cincinnati *Western Spy* got it

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¹ Dayton [Ohio], *Centinel*, June 12, 18, July 1, 1812; Lexington [Kentucky] *Reporter*, November 6, 1813. See also Nashville [Tennessee] *Whig*, November 16, 1813 and Columbus [Ohio] *Gazette*, November 19, 1818.

² Lexington *Reporter*, October 23, 1813 which reprints John J. Crittenden's letter to the *Reporter* of October 5, 1813.

³ Dayton [Ohio] *Republican*, October 25, 1813 from a report by Major Thomas Bodley.

from an officer in Colonel Johnson's regiment that "Colonel Whitley, an old veteran from Kentucky, fell bravely fighting by the side of Colonel Johnson, who certainly shot Tecumseh." The account added that "Johnson received four wounds, one in the hand."⁴ The Lebanon [Ohio] *Star Extra* agreed with the figure of four wounds and claimed that "Johnson killed Tecumseh with his pistol."⁵

This unembellished account grew ornate the following year with an account by Samuel R. Brown, a volunteer in Johnson's Corps, entitled "Views of the Campaigns of the Northern Army":

The colonel most gallantly led the head of his column into the hottest of the enemy's fire, and was personally opposed by Tecumseh. . . . At the moment his horse fell, Tecumseh rushed towards him with an up-lifted tomahawk, to give the fatal stroke, but his presence of mind did not forsake him in this perilous predicament—he drew a pistol from his holsters, and laid his daring opponent dead at his feet . . . He was wounded in five places; he received three shots in the right thigh, and three in the left arm. Six Americans and twenty-two Indians fell within twenty yards of the spot where Tecumseh was killed and the trains of blood almost covered the ground.⁶

Thus did the gore and glory increase. According to the Winchester [Kentucky] *Advertiser*, an English paper in London carried a novel offshoot:

. . . Mr. Clay is the man that killed Tecumseh, and that he cut several razor straps[?] out of his back after he was dead! They must suppose him a dangerous negotiator.⁷

After this initial flurry of interest, the issue died down. Only occasionally in the next fifteen years were there references to Tecumseh's death. In 1817, the eleventh toast at Petersburg, Virginia was:

Colonel Richard M. Johnson—Tecumseh's arm, that erst spread terror through the forests' gloom, fell nerveless before the champion of American liberty.⁸

⁴ *Western Spy* [Cincinnati], October 30, 1813; see also "Proofs" in *Lexington Reporter*, November 27, 1813.

⁵ Lebanon [Ohio] *Star Extra*, n.d.

⁶ Quoted in *Lexington Reporter*, March 19, 1814. The account was also published in *Niles' Weekly Register* and reprinted in the *Kentucky Gazette* [Lexington], November 1, 1838.

⁷ *Winchester Advertiser*, December 5, 1814.

⁸ March 19 toast quoted in *Lexington Reporter*, April 9, 1817. See also the

In 1824 a letter writer "from near Sangamo C.H." proclaimed that:

There was at my house a few days ago an Ottoway Chief who gave the most satisfactory account of the death of Tecumseh that I have heard. He says that he was standing near him when he was shot with a pistol by an American Officer. The dress and horse of Col. Johnson were so described as to leave no doubt on the subject. The chief on hearing the name of Johnson observed that that was the officer who shot Tecumseh. This Indian is the greatest man I ever knew considering his want of education.⁹

This was the beginning of a whole new genre of proof, the use of reputed Indian eyewitnesses.

One might have anticipated that with the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 and the rise of issues related to what is loosely called Jacksonian Democracy, the issue of Tecumseh's demise would die a natural death. But Senator Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky had worked closely with Jackson, and by 1830 he was touted as a possible presidential candidate. Immediately the political stakes of being publicized as the slayer of Tecumseh increased. And with Jackson in less than robust health, many believed that even if he, already in his sixties, chose to run again in 1832, it would be his running mate who would finish up his term in office. The nod went to Martin Van Buren in 1832, but soon a bid was made on behalf of the alleged killer of Tecumseh.

In 1833 a book entitled the *Authentic Biography of Colonel Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky* was published in New York City. The following year a Boston edition was published. The writer was William Emmons who in 1835 sent out an appeal for support of a 100,000 copy edition of a joint biography of Martin Van Buren and Richard M. Johnson. Emmons did write a Van Buren biography in 1835, but without including Johnson.

It was left to another Emmons, Dr. Richard Emmons, a poet and physician, to write and stage *Tecumseh: or, The Battle of*

poem in the *Kentucky Gazette*, August 1, 1822. The dinner was in honor of General Harrison who was present along with a number of other veterans. See the *Western Spy* [Cincinnati], April 11, 1817.

⁹ Lexington [Kentucky] *Public Advertiser*, January 31, 1824. "Sangamo C. H." is probably Sangamon County in Illinois.



Death of Tecumseh

Indiana Historical Society

the *Thames*, a National Drama, in Five Acts which was published both in New York and Philadelphia during the year a vice president would be selected. Knowing the uncertainty surrounding the death of the great warrior, the embellished poetic account is nothing short of ludicrous:

The parade of the identical pistol with which the "hero slew his savage foe," the identical dress worn by Tecumseh at the time of his death, and the identical flag, captured by the Colonel from the British, loaned from the War department, "for the interesting occasion," made up the ne plus ultra of the ridiculous.¹⁰

Nevertheless Johnson was elected vice president and throughout the campaign of 1836 Americans were treated to the rousing jingle "Rumpsey, Dumpsey, Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh!" In 1841 Benjamin Drake put together all of the accounts of Tecumseh's death and concluded that:

¹⁰ Leland W. Meyer, *The Life and Times of Richard M. Johnson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 402. For the works of Richard and William Emmons, see the author entries in the National Union Catalog of the Library of Congress.

Some claimed credit of it for Colonel Whitley, some for Colonel Johnson; but others constituting a majority, including Governor Shelby, entertained the opinion that he fell by a shot from David King, a private.¹¹

Drake used as his source Captain James Davidson and his brother Samuel who Drake said were the authorities used by the editor of the *Commentator* [Frankfort] in 1831 that the:

warrior turned upon Clark; at the same instant, King fired at him with Whitley's gun, and lodged the two balls which he knew it was loaded with, in the chieftain's breast—for when Whitley fell, King threw away his own gun, and took the better one and the powder horn of the old Indian fighter. The Indian dropped upon King's fire:—"Whoop—by G—" exclaimed King, "he was every inch a soldier. I have killed one d--d yellow bugger," and passed on.¹²

By the mid 1830s Tecumseh stories were in full flower. According to one, Johnson:

Found himself restricted by the head or sap of a fallen tree—As he urged his horse over the fallen branches, they snapped, and this noise first drew the attention of the Indian, to his approaching assailant. At the same instant the chief discharged his rifle at the colonel who received the ball in his bridle hand. Our gallant officer, wounded as he was in the hip, leg and the left arm, still pursued on his antagonist, who likewise rushed to meet the colonel; with uplifted tomahawk.¹³

Two years later it was reported that a Blackhawk chief, a bosom friend of Tecumseh, spoke of the fall of the chieftain at the hands of a man "mounted on a light coloured horse, with spots on it, who was severely wounded, particularly in the left hand."¹⁴

In 1840 additional accounts surfaced. The *Chicago Democrat* got it from Chief Shaw-ben-eh that Tecumseh was "a very brave and cautious man. He had, however, been wounded in the neck, and became desperate. He thought his wound was mortal." Johnson killed him and the "skin was taken off an

¹¹ Carl F. Klink, *Tecumseh: Fact or Fiction in Early Records; A Book of Primary Source Materials* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1961), p. 215 quoting Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh, and His Brother the Prophet* (Cincinnati, 1850), p. 214.

¹² Drake, *Tecumseh*, pp. 216-17.

¹³ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, June 8, 1835.

¹⁴ *Kentucky Gazette*, February 9, 1837; *Cincinnati Advertiser*, February 11, 1837.

Indian next to him" when burial took place the next day.¹⁵ Richard M. Johnson had a glib reply for those who questioned whether he had actually killed Tecumseh.

A tall, good looking Indian approached me with his tomahawk ready for a throw. My horse lay in a position that did not permit me to be entirely dismounted. I pulled out a loaded pistol from my holster and shot him. They say it was Tecumseh I shot. I care not, and I know not; I would have shot the best Indian that ever breathed, under such circumstances, without inquiring his name, or asking the ages of his children.¹⁶

Though Johnson retired to private life in 1841, the controversy continued to swirl around him. An 1842 publication used the traditional "razor strip of skin" version but added a new twist according to which Tecumseh was:

Personally opposed to Colonel Johnson, commanding the American mounted riflemen, and having severely wounded that officer with a ball from his rifle, was in the act of springing upon him with his tomahawk, when his adversary drew a pistol from his belt, and shot him dead on the spot. It has since been denied by Americans that the hero met his death from the hand of Colonel Johnson. Such was the statement on the day of the action, nor was it ever contradicted at that period.¹⁷

Lewis Cass in 1852, two years after Colonel Johnson died, stated in a speech in the senate that he had "not a doubt" but that Johnson killed Tecumseh.¹⁸ It could be argued that since Cass had been the Democrats' 1848 presidential candidate Johnson was the official Democratic nominee for Tecumseh-killer and that the Whigs had failed to put up a candidate of their own.

Nevertheless, other slayers of Tecumseh turned up. Nearly a decade after the Civil War, the Louisville *Courier-Journal* announced that Anderson Whitley of Crab Orchard had the gun with which William Whitley had slain Tecumseh.¹⁹ But it was left to C. C. Graham to give the fullest pro-Whitley account.

15 Chicago Democrat, n.d., see also Kentucky Gazette, January 30, 1840.

16 Kentucky Gazette, August 6, 1840; for James Mason to General J. M. McCalla, see Kentucky Gazette, November 12, 1840.

17 John Richardson, *War of 1812* (Brockville, Canada, 1842), pp. 124-26.

18 Western Citizen [Paris], August 20, 1852. For a proposed monument in memory of Johnson, see Western Citizen, May 28, 1852. For another vote for Johnson, see Covington Journal, October 1, 1859 from the Western Church Advocate, n.d.

In this battle Colonel Whitley, in his 65th year, fell, after killing the reknowned chief Tecumseh (as all those I have heard speak of it thought), Tecumseh being shot through the breast with two balls, and Whitley being the only one who invariably loaded with two balls, except a young man by the name of King, whom he kept at his side and trained to do the same. Walking over the ground at the close of the battle, General Adair saw Whitley lying on his face and turned him over, and found the youth, King, standing by him, who said that an Indian chief and Whitley fired at each other at the same time.²⁰

Since the identities of neither Tecumseh nor his killer were known at the outset, it is impossible to identify who fired the fatal shot.

It was left to William Lang who wrote a *History of Seneca County, Ohio* to best express the problem caused by know-it-alls who were positive that *their* man killed Tecumseh:

The question is still an unsettled one. Mr. Abbott, in his history of Ohio, proves the utter falsity of the assertion that Johnson killed Tecumseh, while Mr. Knapp, in his history of the Maumee Valley, is so well convinced of the fact that he proves it, even by affidavits, beyond all question of doubt.²¹

But Johnson was a politician. To use an expression later associated with Tammany Hall, he saw his opportunities and he took them, in this case exploiting the interest in Tecumseh's death and parlaying it into the vice presidency.

19 Louisville Courier-Journal, October 31, 1874.

20 Christopher Columbus Graham, "Pioneer Life" in Louisville Monthly Magazine, April 1879, pp. 197-98.

21 William Lang, *History of Seneca County, Ohio, from the Close of the Revolutionary War to July, 1880* (Springfield, Ohio: Transcript Printing Company, 1880), pp. 48-49. Mr. Lang is referring to the *History of the Maumee Valley* (1872) by H. S. Knapp and *The History of Drake County Ohio, Past and Present* (1880) by W. Scott Abbott.